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or inspiration—attained the unity maintained in this paper—a unity we thus justify by reflection.

But ethical systems like theological, identify too readily empirical teachings, hypothetical maxims, with ultimate truth. They equally with theology can be set free from superstition only by the method and the results of scientific inquiry. Nor is this something lugged in *ab extra*, for science in its devotion to truth is ethical in the truest sense, and by its search for a higher and better truth postulates the reality which religion trusts.

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THE CONCEPTION OF NATURE IN THE POEMS OF MEREDITH.

SINCE the beginning of philosophy, the word "Nature" has been the centre of ambiguities, many of them, no doubt, due to mere confusion, but some, it may well be, pointing to conceptions of real value. The whole subject has never been more pressing than now, and it seems worth while to examine in this connection the work of George Meredith, the last of our poets who has sung of a faith in Nature and a lesson from Nature with high and persistent confidence.

At the outset it will be well to restate the chief of the meanings current. On this hand, "nature" is used in what one might call an external sense, either to denote the world as it appears apart from man—the world of the earth and the wild animals, of the sky and the stars—or to include with this all that happens to man as to other creatures except what is due to his own action. On the other hand, it may refer to the inner world in the heart of man himself, and here it may mean all impulses whatsoever, or only those that tend towards fulness of physical life in the individual. Further, and still more important to note, "natural" is used in the sense of "good," good according to the standard set by man, and this both for

the inner and the outer world. The pure affections of the heart, the grace of a tree, the shapeliness of a horse, are called "natural" in a sense not strictly applicable to what is cruel or ill-proportioned or unseemly. Misapplications, however, are and have always been incessant. A glance at contemporary thought shows what extravagances can follow. Everything in existence must be accepted just as it is; it "comes from nature," and therefore needs no change. Every impulse is "natural," and therefore all are admirable, and ethical chaos has come again. "Self-preservation is the first law of nature," therefore let us glorify brute force and selfishness. It is not, however, my purpose now to dwell on these fallacies, but to ask what are the roots of their persistency. Why in the first instance, was the name of "nature" used for both the inner and the outer world? Why, above all, was "natural" ever chosen as a synonym for "good"?

Now it is obvious that the reverence which the plain man feels for life-promoting impulses ceases at once if they conflict with his ideal of conduct. If he feels an invincible distrust of the suicide, he feels an ineradicable contempt for the soldier who follows the "natural instinct" to run away. Thus, if there is to be any harmony between such judgments, it seems we need a further conception, a belief that somehow these natural impulses are essentially subservient to the moral. Again, the lovers of Nature need not necessarily uphold all her works in themselves as beautiful or beneficent. Even if they misunderstand their own experiences so much as to say, in defiance of clumsiness and dirt, that they find nothing ugly in Nature, they would have to admit that there are degrees in her beauty which need not correspond to degrees in their adoration. It is not only her loveliness that can startle them into recognition. The "meanest flower" can touch as deep springs as the fairest. The pig grunting in the mud can suggest as much as the crossing deerherds "up a clearing's leafy rise."* Nor, unless they shut their eyes to facts, can they deny that Nature is "Nature red in tooth and claw."

* "The Woods of Westerman," G. Meredith.

Yet they may grant all this and still in spite of hurricane and avalanche they may hear a voice in the mountains and the sea. The root of their love, it would seem, is not satisfaction in this or that natural process as it stands, but a sense of a power in and behind each manifestation that must be something more than the mere outward appearance. Any scene that brings such lovers into this presence can do for them what they need, however much it may repel them in other ways. This is the reason of their passion for desolate scenery, where Nature cannot be obscured, as in a well-kept park, by what has sprung from her, of their irritation with those who will only give her the patronage of their approval when she satisfies their æsthetic demand, of their contempt for those who will only notice her "improving examples," as though the snake and the tiger did not share with the bee and the lamb in the same great fount of life. Yet it cannot be mere naked power that they worship, for their whole attitude is essentially one of love, a love which far from making them forget their own ideal seems to brace them for the struggle towards it. Nature's manifestations may not be beautiful or good, yet they seem to be stamped with something that prompts to goodness and beauty. None need be taken as a model for our action, but the touch of the life in them all somehow stimulate us to our own work. If Nature is not moral in herself, she is yet on the side of morality.

Meredith's doctrine is the completion of all such obscure convictions. The external world, apart from the wills of men, he holds to be the manifestation of one Power, "Nature," a power distinct from Man and yet akin to him, akin to the best he has it in him to be. And the urge in each of us towards physical life and enjoyment springs from the same source, and shows in a similar way a real connection with the Best.

Nature in us is, primarily, the force that makes for individual life, and these impulses are therefore "natural" in the prime sense of the word. But they make for something more and therefore they are to be called "good" also, not good,

that is, just because they are natural, but because the natural holds in it the seed of good. But the seed is, so to speak, dormant, and can only be developed by our own struggle, a struggle that is not ignorant of pain and failure. Meredith does not attempt to define with philosophical accuracy the precise relation between these impulses and what we may call their fulfillment. And here lies a great danger for those who try to expound him, the danger of putting their own blundering attempts at system-making in the place of his vital essence. To imagine two separate forces at work in man, Nature and Spirit, and two others that thwart them in the cravings of Disease and Sin, seems to make a ridiculous breach in the unity of the individual. To say that the life-promoting impulse is the same force, only at a lower power, as the hunger and thirst after righteousness seems more reasonable, but does not help towards an explanation of the conflict. Leaving all this aside, however, the essential point to hold is that, somehow or other, these impulses do prompt to something beyond themselves, something that our reason could recognize as absolutely good. If we could reach that, we should find ourselves in no less sympathy than before with physical vitality, but the sympathy would have become intelligent: we should have understood its meaning. One "gate of life" at least may be opened by the joys of the flesh. There may be other paths to the goal, but this at any rate is one. Of "bodily exaltations" Meredith writes deliberately in a passage of singular beauty:

"One who has had them (when they do not bind him), may reach the Isles of Bliss sooner than another. Sensual faith in the upper glories is something. 'Let us remember,' says *The Pilgrim's Scrip*, 'that Nature, though heathenish, reaches at her best to the footstool of the Highest. She is not all dust but a living portion of the spheres. In aspiration it is an error to despise her, forgetting that through Nature only can we ascend. Cherished, trained and purified, she is then partly worthy the divine mate who is to make her wholly so. St. Simeon saw the Hog in Nature, and took Nature for the Hog.'"

It is in such a spirit as this that Whitman can celebrate

*"The Ordeal of Richard Feveral," c. 23.

"the life of my senses and flesh, transcending my senses and flesh," and that Wordsworth can sing of

"Spontaneous wisdom breathed by health,
Truth breathed by cheerfulness."*

Half understood, often misunderstood, again and again this belief in Nature and health comes back upon man. The Bacchanal madness may have meant little else. Such a wild guess at truth is Meredith's theme in the daring impressive grotesque he calls "Jump-to-Glory-Jane." To Jane, the peasant founder of a Shaker Sect, jumping has become the very way of life. She has been visited with sensations of bodily health and vigor that open spiritual vistas, sensations that "are to her as the being of angels in her frame," and through all the whimsical absurdity Meredith never lets us forget that

"It is a lily-light she bears
For England up the ladder-stairs."

It is not that the indulgence of the senses is a kind of pleasurable sauce to be supped now and then in a holiday mood: the senses are rather the raw material of the satisfying life: they are even more, for they are no alien matter on which a form has to be imposed from without: of themselves they demand for their own peace a higher use: the body, as Meredith puts it, is the bride calling for the spirit who is to be the bridegroom; it is "by her own live warmth" alone that Nature can "be lifted out of slime."† Reason is the child of the great mother, the child who is to interpret her inarticulate cries. There is no ultimate discord in the elements of which we are made. Here on this earth we can come in sight of what Browning calls

"the ultimate angel's law,
There where life, law, joy, impulse, are one thing."

The voices of the three singers to young blood,‡ the voice of unreflecting delight in the flesh and its force, the voice of prudence, the voice of personal passion; each by it-

*"The Tables Turned."

†"One of Our Conquerors," c. 35.

‡"The Three Singers to Young Blood."

self incomplete and jarring, childish or harsh or ravenous, could all be brought into the same melody at last:

“Hark to the three. Chimed they in one,
Life were music of the sun;
Liquid first, and then the caw,
Then the cry that knows not law.”

But to reach this harmony toil is needed, and that is the work of man.

Left to herself Nature at best is dumb and lost, at worst, an engine of destruction. Meredith is not the writer to forget

“ how the devil spends
A fire God gave for other ends.”*

“How the God of old time will act Satan of new,
If we keep him not straight at the higher God aimed.”†

And the business of life when life is “thoroughly lived” is just this interpretation of Nature, this “reading of Earth.” This is what it means to “keep faith with Nature”—we are not “wise of her prompting,” we have not understood the rose of her in our blood, if it gives no birth to the “rose in brain,” if the human Good does not blossom out of the natural. Nor does Meredith leave that Good a mere abstraction, though it is not his task to give an inventory of its content. Sympathy and courage are for him true flowers of that immortal garland whose roots are “in good gross earth.” Our problems must all be solved in “the soul of brotherhood.” “Not until we are driven back upon an unviolated Nature, do we call to the intellect to think radically: and then we begin to think of our fellows.”‡ Thus it is idle to dream of mere self-indulgence. The man who has been deceiving himself under the pretext that he is “made of flesh and blood” finds no answer to soothe him after he is startled into a searching doubt of his “clamorous appeals to Nature.” “Are we, in fact, harmonious with the great Mother when we yield to the pressure of our natures for indulgence? Is she, when translated into us, solely the imperious appetite?”||

*R. Browning, “Time’s Revenges.” †“The Empty Purse.”

‡“One of Our Conquerors,” c. 25. || Ibid, c. 40.

The woman who has a right to "Nature's logic, Nature's voice, for self-defence," knows that the price of her keeping it is loyalty of heart and justice of purpose. "The Nature upholding her fled at a vision of a stranger entangled." She knows that "we may be rebels against our time and its laws: if we are really for Nature, we are not lawless."* No marriage is "natural" except that which is founded on the heart's love that can give a life †. Thus it is self in the narrow sense of the word, the petty self always dragging us back from union with our fellows or from the struggle after what we yet admit to be best for our own souls, it is this "old dragon" that is the arch enemy and enslaver alike of Nature and of Man. Meredith cannot be accused of minimizing the conflict: indeed his sense of the perilous strife makes him often utter hard words, at first sight puzzling, against the goddess of his worship. "Untamable old Nature," he can call her, "that wanton old thing, the empress of disorderliness, § "the power that is always pressing to break the dam and be through, uproarious in her primitive licentiousness." ¶

A weighty passage in "Beauchamp's Career" at once expresses this apparent contradiction and gives the solution of it. "The world and nature," it runs, "which are opposed in relation to our vital interests, each agrees to demand of us a perfect victory, on pain otherwise of proving it a stage performance, and the victory over the world, as over nature, is the victory over self: and this victory lies in yielding perpetual service to the world and none to nature: for the world has to be wrought out, nature to be subdued."|| To get the full reality out of our natural instincts and out of the web of relations woven by society, to make them both, that is, the best they have it in them to be, we have unceasingly to refuse the demands of our narrow self in the name of the wider. Such a conflict is accepted by Meredith with confident joy. It is through this struggle alone that character is realized: to count

* *Ibid.* c. 11; † *Ibid.* c. 25; § *Ibid.* c. 18; ¶ *Ibid.* c. 36; || "Beauchamp's Career" c. 42.

ourselves to have attained would be to court a death-in-life:

“Wisdom is won of its fight,
The combat incessant: it dries
To mummy-wrap perching a height.”*

In this spirit he meets life not merely patiently, but as a conqueror. The fact that character can be and is developed by the clash with circumstance is to him warrant for infinite hope. So does Browning see the lost face of God grow again in the outunes of a universe that can mould men. †

This faith of Meredith's is supported and enriched by his conception of a link between Man and the Nature without, a Power real in its own right, no mere phantom of his construction, independent, yet bound to him by a mysterious sympathy.

“For every elemental power
Is kindred to our hearts, and once
Acknowledged, wedded, once embraced,
Once taken to the unfettered sense,
Once claspt into the naked life,
The union is eternal.”§

This union in its most simple and primitive form, the union, as it were, in the mere joy of physical life, Meredith has celebrated with splendid richness of fancy in the “Appeasement of Demeter,” an old myth recast with new significance. The primal mother ceases to care for life, and all the wheels of advance are stopped; not till she returns to the laughter of living can the starved people get “flesh on skeleton.” Mere pain and pleasure, elementary hope and fear, are our first “links to a Mother of grace.”||

But just as the urge to life within us holds, wrapped up in it, much more than mere living, so the union with Nature means much more than this. To be in contact with natural things is to touch a source of righteousness as well as of strength. All poets, perhaps, have felt something of this faith, but Meredith makes it a corner-stone of his thinking. Wordsworth and Whitman offer the nearest parallels to his work in this as in

* “A Faith on Trial.”

† “Epilogue,” fin.;

§ “South-West Wind in the Woodlands”—(out of print).

|| “A Faith on Trial.”

many other points. Whitman will create his poems in the open air and test them "by trees, stars, rivers";* he knows that systems "may prove well in lecture-rooms, yet not prove at all under the spacious clouds and along the landscape and flowing currents."† True religion is taught to Wordsworth's "wanderer" as much by "his habitual wanderings out of door" as by his "goodness and kind works."§ Meredith makes a Diana who has lost her way feel that "one morning on the Salvatore heights, would wash her clear of the webs defacing and entangling her.¶ In one of his most striking poems|| a "lone-laid wife," tempted to weakness and inconstancy, lies awake all night after a season of drought "to hear the rain descend," and the mere sound and smell of the rain, the breathings from Earth's "heaved breast of sacred common mould" of themselves bring to her the strengthening that she needs. So special and marked indeed, is the virtue that goes out of Nature that these three poets are agreed in placing it, in a sense, above what can be got from Man. Why is this? Is it just because Nature is the expression of something *other*, though akin, of an aspect of the whole that could not be resolved into human consciousness? The poets do not answer, but they hold unmistakably that there is something to be got from Nature which cannot be supplied elsewhere. It is doing Wordsworth wrong to explain away his outburst:

"One impulse from a vernal wood
May teach you more of man,
Of moral evil and of good
Than all the sages can."**

Meredith's "South-West Wind in the Woodlands" echoes the thought, almost the very words:

* "By Blue Ontario's Shore"—14.

† "Song of the Open Road"—6.

§ "The Excursion," Bk. I.

¶ "Diana of Crossways," c. 23 fin.

|| "Earth and a Wedded Woman."

** "The Tables Turned." Cf.

"One moment now may give us more
Than fifty years of reason:
Our minds shall drink at every pore
The spirit of the season."—"To my Sister."

"The voice of Nature is abroad
This night; it fills the air with balm;
Her mystery is o'er the land;
And he who hears her now, and yields
His being to her yearning tones,
And seats his soul upon her wings,
And broadens o'er this wind-swept world
With her, will gather in the flight
More knowledge of her secret, more
Delight in her beneficence,
Than hours of musing, or the lore
That lives with men could ever give!"

In this same spirit Whitman speaks of the impression from the starlit sky as beyond anything from art, books, sermons, or from science old or new.* Lucifer in Meredith's sonnet could tower over the earth and its sleeping sinners, but

"at the stars,
Which are the brain of heaven, he looked and sank.
Around the ancient track marched, rank on rank
The army of unalterable law."†

Such a sense of a glory proclaimed by the silent heavens recalls the old Hebrew fire of adoration that, where all else failed, could give a Job strength enough to bear the still unsolved problem of evil.

On the other hand Meredith holds that we cannot hear this voice of Nature any more than we can understand our own "natural impulses," except through incessant striving after the complete human ideal. To reach the fires at the heart of Earth we have to experience the fire of Life. The tortured wife in "Earth and a Wedded Woman" would not go back to the untroubled playtime of her girl-companions:

"They have not known; they are not in the stream;
Light as the flying seed-ball is their play,
The silly maids! and happy souls they seem;
Yet Grief would not change fates with such as they.
They have not struck the roots which meet the fires
Beneath, and bind us fast with Earth, to know
The strength of her desires,
The sternness of her woe."§

* "Specimen Days."—"Hours for the Soul."

† "Lucifer in Starlight."

§ "Earth and a Wedded Woman," III.

The man in "A Faith on Trial," set face to face, as it were, with his whole life, finds in the worst hour of his ordeal that the supreme crisis, valiantly met, has become for him the supreme revealer of Nature's secret:

"But this in myself did I know. . . .
 That natures at interflow
 With all of their past and the now,
 Are chords to the Nature without,
 Orbs to the greater whole;
 First then, nor utterly then
 Till our lord of sensations at war,
 The rebel, the heart, yields place
 To brain, each prompting the soul."

The everyday woods are all enchanted "Woods of Westermain," horrible to cowardice and selfishness, holding a meaning of joy for the valiant, brimful of suggestions for the right life, frank and modest, free and pure, the life that could sing the true song of the mind, where blood and brain and spirit sang together, the life that could rejoice in the change through which the Dragon of Self is tamed and stamped for service, the life that could lead to a glimpse of that fundamental Power, the weaver of the natural world, girt with terrors and thunders and silences, yet felt to be the mother of man, the prompter to reason, and the inspirer of hope.*

Nor can this battle be thoroughly fought out except among men:

"Not solitarily in fields we find
 Earth's secret open, though one page is there, . . .
 Not where the troubled passions toss the mind,
 In turbid cities, can the key be bare.
 It hangs for those who hither thither fare
 Close inter-threading nature with our kind."†

Like Whitman, Meredith will go at one time "through the mighty woods," and at another "through the mightier cities."‡ The "full-grown poet," for him as for Whitman, stands between Nature and Man," "as blander, uniter, tightly holding hands."§ The lore of the Forest is not read till he appears:

*"The Woods of Westermain."

†"Earth's Secret."

‡"Rise O Days from your Fathomless Deeps."

§"When the Full-Grown Poet Came."

"Came then the one, all ear, all eye, all heart;
Devourer and insensibly devoured;
In whom the city over forest flowered,
The forest wreathed the city's drama-mart."

It is he who can show amid the woods—

"What charm the human concourse works,
Amid the press of men, what virtue lurks
Where bubble sacred wells of wildness lone."*

Melampus, learned in roots and herbs, who walked among Earth's creatures "as a scholar who reads a book," loving them all with a fearless love,, a love that had insight in it,

"Melampus dwelt among men: Physician and sage,
He served them, loving them, healing them";

understanding that to use his knowledge thus was to draw from the deepest wellspring of Earth.† So Wordsworth learnt to pass from a mere rapture in the loveliness of Nature, from

"a feeling and a love,
That had no need of a remoter charm
By thought supplied, or any interest
Unborrowed from the eye,"

led on by "the still sad music of humanity" unto the culminating

"sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,"‡

something that moved in Nature and Man alike, something that Euripides sought for in his questioning cry, "Thou, who-ever thou art, hard to guess at, hard to know, *the law of Nature or the mind of Man*,"§ something that was at last realized to be both. Thus Meredith comes to claim that it is only in the faces of heroic men and women that we see the true out-pouring, reflection, definite expression of Nature:

"That is the welling of her, there
The mirror: with one step beyond,
For likewise is it voice."**

*"Forest-History," published in *Literature*, July 9, 1898.

†"Melampus."

‡"Lines composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey."

§Euripides. *Troades*. ll. 885, 886.

**"Hard Weather."

At the same time it will not do to overlook the fact that something more is required for the communion with Nature than the heroic temper. Meredith frankly calls it "faith" and is not afraid of the word. He speaks of it as a "leap of the spirit," admitting that it is not based on logic or laws of evidence, but claiming that it is really a higher manifestation of the Reason that is the base for them:

" 'Tis Reason herself, tiptoe
At the ultimate bound of her wit,
On the verges of Night and Day."*

And like the love for a person, it is the divination of something which is the source of qualities, and a belief in that, not a mere admission of undeniable events and appearances. Her true lover, Earth says, must be awake

"To love more than things of my lap,
Love me."†

To such come revelations in the light of which

"Half strange seems Earth and sweeter than her flowers."‡

As with Wordsworth, so with Meredith, this sense of something in Nature that is more than phenomena and their relations is so intense that he is ready to sympathize with Pagan anthropomorphism rather than to think of her as utterly lifeless. The wildest mythological fancies were closer to her than that:

"Banished is the white Foam-born
Not from here,"

he says of "the mystical woods,"

"nor under ban
Phoebus lyrist, Phoebe's horn,
Pipings of the reedy Pan,
Loved of earth of old they were,
Loving did interpret her;
And the sterner worship bars
None whom Song has made her stars." ||

And further, this embrace of Nature as the wise mother of

* "A Faith on Trial."

† Ibid.

‡ "Meditation under Stars."

|| "The Woods of Westermain."

heroic children, brings with it, for Meredith, something more than the impulse to heroism: it brings an all-embracing hope. Nature, he believes, not only sends us after a good which is our good, but she whispers that we can reach it. It is no chimera we pursue. If we follow her bidding all will be well with us. Thus she is the spring of comfort as well as of courage. Here again Whitman and Wordsworth offer the most striking parallels. Whitman's words in "Specimen Days," ("Death of Thomas Carlyle"), sum up his whole attitude: "with me, too, when depressed by some teasing problem, I wait till I go out under the stars for the last voiceless satisfaction." Wordsworth tells how the mere look of grass and weeds in the rain could bring peace to a heart filled with a tale of hopeless sorrow:

"I well remember that those very pleasures,
Those weeds, and the high speargrass on the wall,
By mist and silent rain-drops silvered o'er,
As once I passed, did to my heart convey,

"So still an image of tranquility,
So calm and still, and looked so beautiful
Amid the uneasy thoughts which filled my mind
That what we feel of sorrow and despair
From ruin and from change, and all the grief
The passing shows of being leave behind,
Appeared an idle dream that could not live
Where meditation was. I turned away
And walked along my road in happiness." *

This belief of Meredith's in an assurance from Nature that nothing in the world or out of it can bring anything but good to the good man leads him to speak of her as pointing to

"The great Over-Reason we name
Beneficence," †

as bidding the mind of man seek "the Master Mind," in the confidence that he can reach it, it, that is, "the great Unseen, nowise the dark Unknown." §

Such passages hint at a conception of the kind suggested above, namely, that Nature is another partial expression of

* "The Excursion," Bk. I. fin. † "A Faith on Trial," fin.

§ "A Reading of Life."

the same ultimate Power working for good that stirs in us, a Power which is greater than either of its manifestations, and which in the end is ruler of all. But Meredith is reticent on the matter, and it is hard to be sure of his precise view. Whatever it is, however, there can be no doubt of his hope. We shall gain, if we are valiant, what will content the valiant. Nothing can stand in the way of that, not death itself. The impulse, fortified by communion with Nature, to face everything that can befall us whether from within or from without, in the faith that it can be stamped with heroism, is a sign that the soul of man can conquer in the battle: in the words of his Diana, it is "a little boat to sail us past despondency of life and the fear of extinction. . . . *There is nothing the body suffers that the soul may not profit by.* . . . With that I sail into the dark; it is my promise of the immortal: teaches me to *see* immortality for us."* The real worth of life lies in the effort to attain the ideal, and the sense of the reality of that ideal, coupled with recognition that the force at the back of Nature is in harmony with it, can show us life beyond the death that ends this life of sense:

"Nought else are we when sailing brave
Save husks to raise and bid it burn,
Glimpse of its livingness will wave
A light the senses can discern
Across the river of the death,
Their close." †

But here arises a question of great importance and difficulty. In what precise sense does Meredith mean that life outlasts death? Does he mean to imply personal immortality, or is he only thinking of the effect on other lives springing from the work done and the life lived by the worker who himself passes utterly away? Passages might be quoted to support either view, but on the whole it seems impossible to explain the triumphant confidence in Nature with which he faces Death on the supposition that it is the end for the individual life:

* "Diana on the Crossways," c. 43.

† "The Thrush in February."

"And O, green bounteous earth!
Bacchante Mother! stern to those
Who live not in thy heart of mirth;
Death shall I shrink from, loving thee?
Into the breast that gives the rose
Shall I with shuddering fall?"*

Making all allowance for a poet's metaphors, how can the Earth be to him such a Mother if she is after all only "the place of graves?" And in the wonderful poem called "Earth and Man," he recognizes expressly that the desire for permanence and joy, the shrinking from dust as the end, springs from the heart of Nature as much as the impulse to heroic effort:

"Those are her rules which bid him wash foul sins;
Those her revulsions from the skull that grins
To ape his end."

"And her desires are those,
For happiness, for lastingness, for light.
'Tis she who kindles in his haunting night
The hoped dawn-rose."

"Fair fountains of the dark
Daily she waves him, that his inner dream
May clasp amid the glooms a springing beam,
A quivering lark."†

But no doubt Meredith holds that the veil is not fully lifted. He sees "the dawn glow through,"‡ but that is all. The faith that he is really concerned to hold to is that it is worth while to go on: that there is "a heart of eternal goodness to receive" the dead, "whatever the nature of the eternal secret may be."§ How much is involved in that "eternal goodness" he does not care to inquire. What the heroic man has a right to claim for his satisfaction will be granted to him, but he is not yet told what that will be. To refuse to continue the struggle unless a detailed answer can be found, means, Meredith thinks, a lack of spiritual vigor. The great Mother teaches a patient trust:

"And 'If thou hast good faith, it can repose,'
She tells her son."||

*"Ode to the Spirit of Earth in Autumn," (out of print).

†"Earth and Man," stanzas 30-32. ‡"Hymn to Colour."

§"Lord Ormont and his Aminta." ||"Earth and Man."

We have simply to do our work,

"Leaving her the future task
Loving her too well to ask.*

It is not the proof of immortality that can make us feel that life is worth living: it is the sense of its worth that assures us of immortality. Nature whispers to the valiant heart that nothing of real value can perish:

"Near is he to great Nature in the thought
Each changing season intimately saith,
That nought save apparition knows the death;
To the God-lighted mind of man 'tis nought.
Close on the heart of Earth his bosom beats,
When he the mandate lodged in it obeys,
Content to breast a future clothed in haze,
Strike camp and onward, like the wind's cloud-fleets."†

Such an attitude explains the sternness with which Meredith speaks of "the questions." If they could all be answered, which they cannot be, what ultimate good should we gain? Scientific proof, if it was to be had, of life after death could not give us the inner significance of life itself:

"Shall man into the mystery of breath,
From his quick-beating pulse a pathway spy?
Or learn the secret of the shrouded death,
By lifting up the lid of a white eye?
Cleave thou thy way with fathering desire
Of fire to reach to fire."‡

However interesting the intellectual search, it is neither the hunger and thirst after righteousness, nor the leap of the spirit to union with Nature and Life. "They scarce have the thirst," Earth is made to say of the questioners,

"Except to unriddle a rune,
And I spin none; only show,
Would humanity soar from its worst,
Winged above darkness and dole,
How flesh unto spirit must grow.
Spirit raves not for a goal."§

*"The Woods of Westermain."

†"A Reading of Life," printed in the *Monthly Review*, March, 1901, Meredith's last published utterance.

‡"Hymn to Colour."

§"A Faith on Trial."

Yet the belief in a goal of some kind is the very foundation of Meredith's philosophy, and it may seem strange to many that he should so persistently refuse to define it any further. His own summing-up of the matter does inevitably suggest questions that cannot ultimately be put aside:

“Then let our trust be firm in Good,
Though we be of the fasting;
Our questions are a mortal brood,
Our work is everlasting.
We children of Beneficence
Are in its being sharers;
And Whither vainer sounds than Whence,
For word with such wayfarers.”*

How can our work be everlasting if it is only done for a perishing race? How can we talk of Beneficence, if all the mutilated lives only “subserve another's end?” Are we not driven to a further inference? Is not Whitman's attitude with its unmistakable demands, more logical and complete?

“Pleasantly and well-suited I walk,
Do you think I could walk pleasantly and well-suited toward annihilation?”†

But to say that Meredith stops short where it would be more natural to go on is not to deny that his way of approach is the right one. And his hard words are well deserved by that “foolish and adulterous” stretching at evidence which fancies it can take the place of the “mortal moral strife” that for Meredith, as for Clough, alone forges the key to the “fast-shut door.” That is the “cry of unfaith,” “crying aloud for an opiate boon,”||

“Unfaith clamouring to be coined
To faith by proof;” ||

that is the spirit that proffers

“vows of living faith.
For little signs.” **

It springs from the senses that must “touch and feel” in order

*“The Question Whither,”

†“To Think of Time.”

‡“A Faith on Trial.”

||“Earth and Man.” **Ibid.

to be sure; it is nursed by the temper that shrinks from tragedies;* it leads on to a denial of any value in the life of earth, even to an acquiescence in that base heaven of the elect from which a man's fellows are shut out:

"From dust, of him abhorred,
He would be snatched by Grace discovering worth.
'Sever me from the hollowness of Earth?
Me take dear Lord!' "†

The fullest expression of Meredith's whole view of the matter is to be found in "A Faith on Trial," a poem evidently auto-biographical. Under the burden of his wife's death the poet finds no other answer from Nature to his questions and his cravings, but the simple bidding to go on with his work, with his aspirations, with his

"dreaming of good
Illimitable to come,

in union with his brothers, and in the confidence that everything he meets comes from the "sacred Reality" which is stern only to the selfish self. This gives him "a reading of Earth" through which

"a concord deeper than cries
Of the Whither whose echo is Whence,"
springs up
"as a fountain-jet in the wind
Bowed dark o'er the falling and strewn."

As pledge and earnest of the ultimate triumph he grasps "the very sap of the vital" in the one recognition

"That from flesh unto spirit man grows
Even here on the sod under sun."

That is all, but it is enough:

"and have we wept,
And have we quailed with fears,
Or shrunk with horrors, sure reward
Who see through mould the rose unfold,
We have whom knowledge crowns;
The soul through blood and tears." §

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* "A Faith on Trial." † "Earth and Man." § "Outer and Inner."